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Politics and People

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Exit an Era

Washington

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Every President has his own distinctive style of White House operations, and President Johnson leans to the traditionalist which his predecessor disdained as too cumbersome, too slow, and too subject to roadblocks of inertia.

The transition becomes complete with the departure from the presidential staff of McGeorge Bundy, who took over a job created by President Kennedy to act as his own eyes, ears and trail boss in matters of national security. Although the vacancy likely will be filled, the job specifications disappear because Mr. Johnson is a do-it-yourself man with overdrive who is his own watcher, listener and drover.

President Johnson now wholly completes the changeover to his own men from the White House staff he inherited. The new roster is strikingly different in the absence of Ivy League representation.

Academics of any order are rarities in the front row of White House aides, those of the rank of special assistant to the President or the equivalent. Mr. Johnson clearly feels more at home with helpers other than professional intellectuals.

Jack Valenti, a White House handyman regarded as closest to the President of the staff members, has an explanation.

As recorded by Charles Roberts in his book "LBJ's Inner Circle," it is: "The President wants men around him who will cry when they see an old lady fall down in the street."

Mr. Bundy, last of the New Frontiersmen, was ungiven to tears under any circumstance. His most distinguishing characteristic was a flinty hardness, which appears to have been what President Kennedy was looking for to overcome the frustrations of a treacle-footed bureaucracy. The province assigned him was the agencies dealing with national security—State Department, Defense Department, Central Intelligence Agency, Atomic Energy Commission.

All information reports and recommendations from these passed over his desk in the White House basement, and from them he filtered alternative recommendations for presidential consideration, even in defiance of the departmental preference.

It was what President Kennedy wished. He was impatient of the slow motion and closed end thinking he found in the bureaucracy. Arthur Schlesinger, an earlier departure from the White House staff, quotes President

Kennedy: "Bundy and I got more done in one day at the White House than they do in six months in the State Department. They never have any ideas over there."

In effect, Mr. Bundy was established as an independent buffer between the Cabinet and the President, although the Cabinet members are formally the ranking presidential advisers.

President Johnson has for some time been moving away from that concept, bit by bit, without however going all the way back to the institutionalism which was the practice under President Eisenhower.

The revived traditionalism acknowledges the chain of command, with Cabinet members reporting direct to the President for their departments, and no meddling from the White House in the lower echelons. Of special importance to the satisfactory working of this system is the close attention President Johnson gives to the selections for the 400 or so key jobs in the Government just below Cabinet level, making up the executive leadership best

positioned to protect the presidential wishes from circumvention deeper in the mazes of the 2.2 million governmental employees.

This watch upon original choices for key places assists in executive defense against concealed congressional interference. Long-term congressmen, those who make Capitol Hill decisions vitally affecting the bureaucracy—appropriations among them—can derail a presidential directive deep within a department unless supervision is alert and quick to act. President Johnson gives close study to possible choices for supervisory berths turned up by his talent scouts, and it is expected that he makes protection of his interests a binding condition of appointment.

President Kennedy looked for brilliancy in his staff members. President Johnson looks first for loyalty, and for this reason among others the evidence indicates he never found the Kennedy system fully congenial after it passed to him.

A prime consideration is the Johnsonian urge to keep everything in his own hands, to keep his own counsel, and for face to face dealing without middlemen.

For the same reason he shows no disposition to return to the Eisenhower system. This ran to full-dress and unproductive Cabinet meetings, to an elaborate organization of the National Security Council, and a precise table of organization. Mr. Johnson does it himself. It is a different era at the White House.